

## This Thing Called Heresy

The charge of heresy<sup>1</sup> against individuals, groups, and denominations continues to escalate in the church world today. We have more divisions (sects) within the Christian religion than there are fleas on a hound dog. Each sect points to all the reasons they cannot walk with most if not all of the others sects in the world. Paul notes that such divisions within the body is not a good thing and needs to be corrected by a proper understanding of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

What about all of these denominations that exist with all laying claim to the identity of Christian? Are they biblical? Should they exist? There is only one body of Christ, the Christian church and it cannot be divided. This church consists of all believers from day one of creation until that future day when Christ will judge all at the end of the world. Theologians have attempted to create a definition of church that allows for a division of a visible and an invisible church. This true church of Christ is the invisible church. All of the churches we see in the world today exist in history and are called the visible church. For practical purposes such arbitrary divisions are necessary. In the flesh man will never perfectly agree on very many things. Where disagreements exist it is hard for men to walk together. The Bible asks this very question, “Amos 3:3, Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” The question is rhetorical and the implied answer is an absolute no. We find then that there are significant differences among men skilled in the exegesis and interpretation of Scripture and at some places they end with conclusions that are opposite each other. Obviously when the difference is this great these men cannot coexist within the same physical church though both very well belong to the true church.

Where beliefs are opposite each other it is obvious one is wrong and the other is right. God did not give to us a contradiction like this in the Scriptures. The solution of divisions within the visible church becomes a necessity. However, we find in the flesh that neither side is willing to give any credibility to the other side. The debates become heated with charges of heresy being hurled by each side toward the other. Essentially heresy means a belief that differs from the orthodox<sup>3</sup> position. The question then must be who sets the orthodox positions when the church is so divided and none have a majority? We find then that orthodox means different things to each division within the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary entry: heresy >noun (pl. heresies) 1 belief or opinion contrary to orthodox religious (especially Christian) doctrine. 2 opinion profoundly at odds with what is generally accepted. -ORIGIN Greek haireisis 'choice, sect'.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:3 For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?

<sup>3</sup> Dictionary entry: orthodox >adjective 1 conforming with traditional or generally accepted beliefs. 2 conventional; normal. 3 (Orthodox) relating to Orthodox Judaism or the Orthodox Church. - DERIVATIVES orthodoxly >adverb. -ORIGIN Greek orthodoxos, from doxa 'opinion'.

Should a man find himself in agreement in some places and attempt to communicate across the lines of communications he is slammed with a charge of being heterodox.<sup>4</sup> This makes about as much sense as the proverbial kettle calling the pot black. (See definitions in footnotes) Orthodox and heterodox come from the same Greek root most literally translated to English by the word opinion. Both terms essentially mean not conforming to the orthodox position.

The current debate of scholars in the reformed world surrounds the doctrine of justification. The Reformed and Presbyterian world stands on the opposite side of the coin from the Church of Rome and most other churches in the so-called Protestant world. As can be seen here it is quite proper for each side to call the other heretics and those who would have social intercourse with the other side as being guilty of heterodoxy and be in complete accord with the accepted meaning of the terms used.

Many to create divisions where none are needed use tertiary<sup>5</sup> standards, or those that have nothing to do with the Bible or the confessions of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. For example whether grape juice may be used in the communion cup or must it be of the fermented variety and more properly wine? The Bible does not give a nice black line that should not be crossed here. The confessions of the Reformed churches do not make this fine distinction, thus this is a third order standard, not of the orthodoxy of reformed churches.

Within the Reformed church world the acceptance of the Bible as the primary standard is a given. Most claim the confessions as teaching the doctrines of the Bible. This should end the differences that can be called upon for reasons not to walk together within one body. This means we could have churches for example that only sing psalms in complete fraternal relations or even belonging to the same higher court as a church that sings hymns.

When we look outside the Reformed world we will find differences that relate to more biblical doctrines such as baptism or the doctrines of justification, sanctification, or eschatology. Obviously these cannot walk together nor belong to the same governing bodies at higher levels. However the early churches had a standard to decide if a church was a part of the true body of Christ or apostate.<sup>6</sup> This standard called for the preaching of the Word, the proper presentation of the sacraments, and the practice of Christian discipline within the church. Churches that met these three standards were considered part of the true body though theologically they stood at opposite poles. This is a fair standard and should be the one used to decide if we should have relations of any sort with another church within the overall body of Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> Dictionary entry: heterodox >adjective not conforming with orthodox standards or beliefs. - DERIVATIVES heterodoxy >noun. -ORIGIN from Greek doxa 'opinion'.

<sup>5</sup> Dictionary entry: tertiary >adjective 1 third in order or level. 2 chiefly Brit. (of education) at a level beyond that provided by schools. 3 (of medical treatment) provided at a specialist institution - ORIGIN Latin *tertiarius* 'of the third part or rank'.

<sup>6</sup> Dictionary entry: apostate >noun a person who renounces a belief or principle.

We need to remove tertiary standards in deciding with whom we can walk with. They should never be a reason to have a division within a body where adherence to the Bible and confessions is solid. This means many of the small divisions we have in the Reformed world today are alone and small for reasons that should never divide the visible church.

This also means that neither side really has the right to call the other heretical nor outside orthodoxy since these terms have a narrow meaning within groups that have like beliefs. The terms only have meaning when judged in relation to the standard of beliefs of the body making the charge.

When these standards are in place bodies of believers in various denominations can work together in reaching the lost with the Good News of Jesus Christ and to adding substance to the admonition to go and be blessed, filled, warm, and well. Resources can be more efficiently used and good stewardship of the materials provided by God achieved. Small groups will find they can indeed walk with other believers to create more effective missions at home and to the ends of the earth. Union into one church is a goal that will not ever be reached nor should be sought. Unity of purpose in bringing the glory to God and Good News to all men is a biblical mandate. Only and only when it can be proven that a person or church has removed themselves from a very narrow essential of divine truth and are properly apostate should we separate from them.

The Gospel is short and sweet, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son ...” The rest of Scripture lays before man the revelation of man’s need for a Savior and God’s provision of a savior more in the way men should walk before God than in the finer points of theology. It is interesting to note that doctrine as used by Paul to instruct Timothy consisted of things to do, not things to believe. Likewise throughout the Bible God gives directions for how His people should live, not word for word what they should believe.

Proper theology will bring peace and comfort to men; it will not open the gates of heaven. Properly understood Reformed theology removes the burden of the word of God’s Law and sets man free in the grace of Jesus Christ. Why then brother are you casting stones at your brother in Christ instead of assisting each other in reaching the world of darkness with the light of Jesus Christ?

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